

and not topple off that precipice into the unknown waters. I don't really know, scientifically, what these physical symptoms may portend, but I have learned that when they come I should get a pencil and begin to draw. Because, I know, I have picked up a picture, from god knows where, like a virus, and it's inside my mind, waiting to be summoned out and captured on canvas. It's like I've developed an eye inside my head which only my subconscious can use, and when my subconscious sees something that excites it, it transfers that image to my conscious mind in the form of a painting.

The strength of the physical symptoms always correlated directly with the quality, or power, of the painting. On this occasion, looking upon *The House of the Nine Sisters*, the symptoms were so intense I lost my balance and nearly fell over the railing off the balcony.

"Xavier, you sure you're OK? Maybe we should go on that hike? You painting's not important. You can paint later."

It was Kira, trying once again to break the mood.

"In a few..." I replied, my voice betraying a hint of annoyance.

It never failed; whenever I was about to do something important, something which might get me ahead, Kira would inevitably try to draw me away from it. At first I thought it was not something she did purposefully; that she was just an impatient individual, but I had long since dispelled that illusion. Like a robot, every single time I began to do something which might make me stand apart from others, show or utilize some unique skill, Kira would say or do something to try and stop me; always polite, never direct, but very trying on my patience.

I glared in her direction, venom dripping from my eyes.

A single long strand of raven black hair dropped down over her lithe almandine face. She was not tall, but was a presence nonetheless, as her strong personality and graceful moves compensated for her lack of height. But her tendency to exert her will on others, without regard to the damage her

directed will could do, made me wish on more than one occasion I had never met her.

Men stared at her all the time and wondered how it was that I, a man of modest means, could have pulled her. But, as was often the case, those same people were asking the wrong question. I hadn't exactly pulled her, though we had dated, on and off, for many years. Though our relationship was primarily based on what I like to sarcastically call *friendship*, we had been physically intimate on a few occasions.

We had an understanding. I believed in freedom, plain and simple. She could come and go as she pleased, and was encouraged to have relationships with other men. I made no secret that I believed controlling relationships were tools of those seeking to dominate others, and marriages were little better than slavery. Kira, however, was more the jealous type. In the final analysis, that's probably why we were friends. My philosophy of near total freedom interested her. Or maybe she was angry that I was so free and wanted to enslave me. Maybe she just liked a challenge.

I was momentarily engulfed by the same range of emotions that overcame me every time I looked at her. Her mother had been Greek, her father Russian. She still spoke and read Greek fluently, and I found her accent exotic, sophisticated, and attractive. Her shiny green top with tight short sleeves was a work of art in itself, and I could not deny the overtly insistent physical attraction which pulled me to her. I wanted her and hated her all at the same time. Deep inside, I knew that cutting her off, never speaking another word to her, was the correct thing to do. With her around always trying to control my actions my personal evolution was being blunted. I was not becoming that which I should, or could, become. My innate sense of justice demanded that I end our relationship in retribution for all the little things she had done to me.

She never stopped trying to make me conform to the rules of a culture which I had transcended. Marriage, anniversaries, holidays, family, cultural labels, schools, slang, movies, television... fashion, the bible, Christianity, love, friendship, books,